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ABSTRACT

The proposition that "every young person should graduate from high school with a marketable skill" raises a number of significant issues. (1) Any prescription for "every" person is questionable. (2) Does the phrase "marketable skill" refer to a specialized skill or does it refer to the ability to fill a job? (3) If the definition of marketable skill applies to the ability to be productive in a job, then the most important qualities are the communication skills and personal traits derived from general education that produce fully-rounded human beings. (4) Increased vocational training of young people does not necessarily increase employment. (5) High schools are likely not to be very proficient at vocational education. (6) For students with capacity and motivation for general education, the cost of employability at age 18 would be a shortening or dilution of general education. (7) Much youth unemployment occurs among culturally handicapped youth with inadequate general education and vocational training; our problem is to raise their cultural level through a foundation of general education. (8) In conclusion, "every young person should be encouraged both before and after the age of 18 to acquire the traits that flow from a solid general education." (EA)

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MARKETABLE SKILLS FOR YOUTH

The proposition before us is that "every young person should graduate from high school with a marketable skill." I find this proposition interesting. It raises a surprising number of significant issues. I shall consider the proposition by means of a series of somewhat disconnected comments. These will lead me to the tentative conclusion that the proposition is not wholly valid.

1. Because people have widely varying talents, experiences, and aspirations, any prescription for every person is bound to be questionable.

2. The meaning of the phrase "marketable skill" is obscure. Does this refer to some specialized skill like auto repair, typing, or computer programming? Or does it mean simply the ability to fill a job. In fact, the economy offers work to many people without specialized skills. Some of these get only menial jobs but others get attractive jobs with bright futures. And certainly many people find work where the skills are learned on the job through training or experience. Indeed, if every young person had a specialized skill, not all of them could be employed in jobs where the skills could be used.

3. If one stretches the definition of marketable skill to mean the ability to be productive in a job (that is, to be able to produce enough to justify receipt of the minimum wage) then the most important skills one can have are those derived from general education, namely the ability to read; to write clearly; to converse coherently; to calculate; to know something of history, geography, literature, science, and public affairs; to have self-discipline, persistence, self-confidence, and initiative; to be able to function in interpersonal relations; to have high standards of personal conduct; and to have moral and religious insights. These qualities are partly skills and partly traits. But they are the personal qualities that matter on most jobs and that determine the ability of the individual to function in the economy. They are also the qualities that lead to good citizenship and that make good lives.

These qualities are not incongruent with specialized skills. There is nothing bizarre about a person who has the qualities that flow from a general education and also works as a plumber or a machinist or a bookkeeper. Despite John Gardner, our pipes are more likely to hold water if they are installed by educated and responsible plumbers than if put in place by ignorant ones, and our plumbers are more likely to be fully-rounded human beings than if their general education has been sacrificed to the acquisition of a skill.

4. The proposition seems to assume that if more young persons were vocationally trained, employment in the economy would be increased. This assumption raises some complex issues. The economy is very flexible in adapting to the skills and traits of whatever labor is available, and employers are very good at training unskilled workers. The effect of adding vocational skills during the high school years may be to cause employers to use the labor force differently, or to redirect their training activities, but not necessarily to increase employment. Employment is determined more largely by aggregate demand based on the decisions of investors and consumers, and by governmental monetary and fiscal policy, than it is by the distribution of the skills of workers. With given aggregate demand, if the skills of young persons were upgraded, the effect might be to expand their employment at the cost of displacing other workers.

5. Our proposition seems to imply that vocational skills would be acquired within high schools. In my opinion, high schools are likely not to be very proficient at vocational education. Vocational learning might better be carried on in workplaces, and in out-of-school hours such as late afternoons, Saturdays, and vacations.

6. The proposition seems to imply that young persons ought to go to work at age 18, perhaps postponing their higher education. This implication raises grave doubts. It is true that not all high school graduates are ready in maturity and motivation for college. It is very popular today to advocate stopping out. Yet, we must be cautious about postponement of post-secondary education. Students who delay going on may never return to education in a concentrated and serious way. Moreover, in the early years of life, the cost of education in forgone income is at a minimum and the benefits of education

can be spread over a maximum number of working years.

One can think of many reasons why it would be good for eighteen-year-olds to be able to take jobs if they chose to do so. The ability to get a job would enlarge their choices, it would give them a sense of economic security, it would reduce their dependence on their parents, it would give them a sense of adulthood and of responsibility, it would help them finance post-secondary education through part-time work, and it would enable them to gain experience which would make later education more meaningful. These options would be valuable whether or not they were exercised. Moreover, acquiring the ability to get a job might be valuable learning of a kind that would complement academic learning.

The question is: What would be the cost of becoming employable at the age of 18? By cost, I mean: What alternatives would have to be sacrificed? The main cost in this sense would be a shortening or dilution of general education. This cost would be quite different for three groups of students. First, those students whose general traits and abilities acquired through general education would make them employable, would bear no cost. For them, no general education would have to be sacrificed. Second, those students lacking either the capacity or the motivation for a general education, would bear no cost. They would be prime candidates for vocational education. Cost would be important only for a third and intermediate group of students who have the capacity and the motivation for general education but might not compete for jobs without specialized skills. For them, the cost of employability at age 18 would be a shortening or dilution of general education. This middle group is probably quite large. I believe the interests of these people, and of the society, would not be served by short-cutting or postponing general education in favor of vocational education. I would rather take a chance on some congestion in the labor market for youth than to cut back on general education. I believe that in the long run general education will have higher returns on both employment and income than vocational education.

7. Much of the unemployment of youth occurs among those who are handicapped by ethnic origins and family and neighborhood backgrounds and who have neither a good general education nor sound vocational training. Our problem, which is far from easy to solve, is to raise the cultural level of these persons through general education so that they will have the foundation on which all

careers are based.

8. To conclude, I would rephrase the proposition. Instead of recommending that every young person should graduate from high school with a marketable skill, I would assert that every young person should be encouraged both before and after the age of 18 to acquire the traits that flow from a solid general education. These traits, which I have enumerated, will provide the foundation for good careers and good lives. My worry is that our educational system is not today capable of providing such an education in a way that will appear interesting and relevant to many young people. I concede that concern for vocations may be a way of establishing relevance and I favor vocational orientation and even some vocational training as a part of general education. But I advocate this on grounds that it will improve and enrich general education, not that it would be a substitute for it. Pure vocational education is no fitting substitute for solid general education.